American Sociology as Moral Life*

Jessie Bernard
The Pennsylvania State University (Research Scholar Honoris Causa)


The authors of this book cue us into its general thrust by quoting from Harold Bloom's 1973 essay on "The Anxiety of Influence," which states that our "precursors flood us, and our imaginations can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded." Enough history but not so much as to petrify or drown us. Just enough to foster a "richer knowing." So we are told this book is "neither a history nor an exegesis but is concerned with establishing the links between the religious roots of nineteenth century thought and the central concepts of contemporary sociology" (xi). Its major purpose is to remind the discipline of "that part of its religious past that continues to affect its intellectual perspective" today (xi). A reminder, I might add, that some sociologists—especially older ones—will find unwelcome, resuscitating memories long since repressed, which they would prefer to evade.

The subtitle refers to "the intellectual and moral problems that the social sciences confront when their concepts are transvalued from religious into secular terms" (xi), a process which started early in the century when:

American sociology began to separate itself from its most visible religious orientations . . . [and substituted] sociodicy—a vindication of the ways of society to man—for the theodicy¹ that had originally inspired them. American sociologists retained the original spirit of Protestant world salvation. They [merely] substituted a language of science for the rhetoric of religions (1).²

¹ The term theodicy dates back to 1797 in the English language, somewhat earlier in German. It is based on the Greek words for God and Justice. The theodicy that prevailed in American sociology was based on the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant covenant. Sociodicies varied even more than theodicies. They sometimes became a "cockpit of creeds" (Vidich and Lyman:305).
² This was a substitution that condemned the new discipline to a perpetual series of crises. Early in the nineteenth century, on one street in Paris August Comte was lecturing on his religion of Humanity while on another, competitive lectures were being given by followers of Saint-Simon. Each kept circling around this question: who and what is the sociologist? In the end, all of them made it clear that they were bent on establishing a new religion, a religion of humanity, and that they believed its priesthood would be so-

525
After discussing eighteen individual thinkers\(^3\) and seven institutions,\(^4\) North, South, East and West, the authors find that the rejections of religion took many forms. The positivists and the functionalists gave up the “utopia of a world-wide Christian community” promised by the Christian theodicy, for a cold, impersonal, “bloodless entelechy of a society-centered dynamic equilibrium” with little concern for the individual. The heterodox sociologists—Sumner, Cummings, Teggart, Park, Blumer, Goffman—on the other hand, when they rejected religion did not forget “the humanity of the person” (307). The book clearly favors heterodoxies, for it is from them that “flow the intellectual visions of a sociodicy yet to be developed for a modern industrial society” (307): a thoughtful statement of a controversial point of view. This review does not seek to improve on the book by exegesis. It seeks, rather, to put flesh and bones on the abstractions of its major themes, to see them from the point of view of a participant observer.\(^5\) But because I found the book especially interesting, having myself traversed much of the same historical material (Bernard, 1929, 1953), and more to the point, because I participated in parts of the story, I am delighted to write this essay based on it. The first part of this essay deals with the basic theodicy versus sociodicy issue and the second part with the intra-sociodicy issues.

When I entered the world of sociological scholarship in the early 1920s, many of the textbooks I studied were written by the men American Sociology is all about. I did not know then that sociology, like Darwinian evolution, was also a terrain on which the struggle between science and religion, albeit at a lower decibel level, was being fought or that the 1920s marked a midpoint between the time when L. F. Ward had stated in 1903 that the case for the secular nature of sociology had

---


\(^4\) Yale, Harvard, Columbia, University of Chicago, University of Wisconsin, Stanford, and the University of California at Berkeley (xi).

\(^5\) Which, of course, may or may not be a valid perspective. It may even, heaven forbid, be an example of the very relativism which critics of sociology have accused it of teaching.

526